

So Spoke Penelope

TINO VILLANUEVA

SHINING LIKE THE SEA

Because love seeks out love,
deserves to be loved in several ways,
Odysseus, to whom I gave my heart freely,
knows he must return,
knows there's much between us
that remains.

I cannot hide these thoughts, not now
before the solitary, vast, red-round sun
sinks. Here I go once more, demanding
what I can of love that way,
by which I mean
 love of the grandest kind—

heart-felt love,
up-and-down-my-body love.

Tino Villanueva is the author of six books of poetry, among them *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (Curbstone Press) which won a 1994 American Book Award, now in its fourth printing (2006), and *Primera causa / First Cause* (1999), a chapbook of ten poems on memory and writing. His art work has appeared on the covers and pages of national and international journals, such as "Nexos", "TriQuarterly", "Parnassus".

SOMETIMES, IN QUIETUDE

I lie awake and turn it over in my head
that waiting for a man twelve years is useless.
A man away that long
should have the heart to send word home.
Othertimes I try to have no thoughts at all, no thoughts
on what the Fates are spinning out for young Telemachus,
and me;
on whether I can find it in myself to honor custom—
to take another man in marriage, a father for my son,
withdraw completely from this place,
and not look back.

Nights, I try to find deep sleep, which easily
doesn't come.
Worst the nights of cold and frost when my longing
drags my spirit down to the stony floor, the air
moving through the branches
jangling my nerves.
In bed beside me—great gods in the morning
...I'm married to the passing of time! What bliss is this,
counting the years in the dark, useless time
like a living thing I can't escape?

Warm nights are not much better
when tormentor Aphrodite overwhelms me
at the slightest movement I might make,
or when a lulling, loving breeze slips in through the window
and has its way with me, wandering all along my naked skin.
How much are you a wife, my spirit finally asks,
if tomorrow you relent and take another man as mate?
Not much, comes my reply:
not much if you cast too soon bright hope aside.
And so I wait along the sands...and keep on
waiting for the whims of the gods,

the rocking motion of the sea
to issue up a man as much in love with me
as I with him.

THE SUITORS

O those blustery brutes:
the crudest of the crude crowding my thoughts.
Rain or shine,
it's them again: rowdy louts befouling the air
with the rough language of their praise.
From up here
they are sound in my ears, pure chatter,
low-cunning boastful men who wear no patience
...loud, saying nothing that matters.

Me, I've grown stubborn all these years. So have they.
The more I refuse them the more they desire me on and on
as they would sweet figs glowing
in someone else's orchard,
fruit from which they'll never eat,
all the while emptying the larders, butchering my cattle,
swilling my wine.
The mess they daily make,
my poor maidservants unmake with the same sore hands
that scrub the floor and grind the grain.

What remarkable occurrence, indeed,
if I could lead them to a crossing point,
a contest of some sort—a test of strength of much devising,
where each would fall or fail into defeat.
After all, not one suitor I'd want to hug to my breast:
not brash Amphinomus, not Eurymachus nor Antinous.
One delightful day, if I can hold my ground,
I shall greatly welcome
 their departure.

I may, on occasion, groom myself to show a better presence
...to look attractive, you might say,

and so they gaze their fill whenever I'm downstairs.
How flattered they must feel
thinking I'm doing it for them, when it's really for myself.

And little do they realize when they see me smiling
through my veil,
that I'm smiling with my mouth,
not with my eyes.

At last...at last it's night,
and each suitor has repaired to his home, out of sight.

I breathe the fresh, clean air.

WAKEFUL DREAMING

These days I follow a path
straightway into wakeful dreaming.
The wind rises,
and I imagine a black, smooth-sailing ship approaching Ithaca;
the wind subsides, and I dream on,
hearing a man's footsteps—
Argos barking in the background.

Another year has come full round,
and in my mind's great meanderings trying to understand
why my husband in due season has not returned,
I've nowhere to go but to believe
it's Odysseus striding through the palace,
husband I love all the way to the moon.
His leaving is the tears behind my eyes.

Back-to-back nights play upon the mind,
nights fading into the mounting rose-blush
of yet another dawn.
Soon upon me comes the light
marked by the mid-day blazing of the sun
slanting down toward afternoon and the colors of twilight.
Then dark again... dark.
What's the use—my days get spent that way;
no wind can blow back the years gone past.

O just once would suffice: a cluster of silver arrows
launched from the bow of Artemis divine,
finding their mark through flesh, here,
the center of my heart.

LOVE BOUND

The sun rose,
blossomed into brightness, then took its time
heading toward the center of the sky. There it stood,
the solitary sun keeping its place,
glaring down until
the shadowed places were on the move again;
by which time I was bored, hungry,
so I had a bite to eat.
While the maids on their knees
kept grinding and sifting wheat and barley grain,
heaping handfuls cupped together, six-hundred someone said,
measured into baskets big,
and grumbling they were, all the while,
working masses of dough into flat loaves for the fire,
I slept,
and awoke at the moment when the sea was glazed
with red-becoming-orange—it was Helios
at the end of his run at the horizon's precipice,
then was gone.

In my room and around the palace, darkness abounds,
my mind sitting in shadow when two thoughts come to light:
that out of love bound together
by whatever binds together love over time,
I can wait for Odysseus, the man I like to think is mine alone;
that whatever lives in me, I call love—
true-wife love kept deep in the bone,
where only a wife can know it.